THE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS EVER SPOKEN
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Psalm 22:22–31
Mark 8:31–38

"Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."
Mark 8:35 (NRSV)

To Christians Jesus is the Incarnation, God's love in person on earth.
God's love is visionary, perceiving behind the armor most of us don
an individual unprecedented and unrepeatable.
And God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it.
Christians recognize their value as a gift rather than an achievement:
it is not because we have value that we are loved,
but because we are loved that we have value.
. . . .
Love measures our stature; the more we love the bigger we are.
There is no smaller package in all the world
than that of an individual all wrapped up in himself/herself.

William Sloane Coffin
The Courage to Love; Credo

On January 25, several hundred people gathered in the sanctuary of our neighborhood synagogue, Chicago Sinai Congregation, to watch a film together. The audience included Jews, mostly members of Chicago Sinai, and Christians, mostly members of this congregation. The film we had gathered to watch together was *Bonhoeffer,* a documentary which was shown on PBS a few weeks later. The producer, Martin Doblemeier, was there and addressed the audience. A panel of theologians, including Martin Marty and Rabbi Michael Sternfield, reflected on the film and Bonhoeffer's significance. I found it to be a powerful and disturbing experience to sit in the sanctuary of a Jewish synagogue and watch images of Kristallnacht, the night in November 1938 when coordinated gangs of Nazis desecrated synagogues and attacked Jewish-owned businesses all over Germany. It was a powerful experience to sit in a synagogue and see images of Auschwitz. It was a painful experience as a Protestant minister to see leaders and

bishops of the German Protestant Church smiling, eagerly shaking hands with Adolf Hitler, arms raised in the Nazi salute.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as many of you know, was a German pastor and promising theologian from a distinguished, traditional German family. Days before the end of the war, he was executed by the Nazis for his participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

In the introduction to his definitive biography, Union Seminary scholar Larry Rasmussen asks, "What explains the continuing interest in Bonhoeffer: documentaries, made-for-TV movies, musical compositions (including an opera), conferences, commemorative worship services," not to mention countless references to Bonhoeffer in countless sermons?

Rasmussen thinks it's because in Bonhoeffer we see an example of authentic Christian faith, a Christian whose life was an authentic combination of words and acts. I think it's because to know his story is to understand that he actually did something that is at the very heart of what we mean by Christian faith, something none of us wants to do, perhaps would not do—namely take up a cross and follow Jesus and in the process lose our lives.

Just before the war, Bonhoeffer was in New York, at Union Seminary. Friends in the scholarly community had encouraged him to get out of Germany and to pursue his scholarly vocation in the safety of an American seminary. In June of 1939, he wrote a letter to his mentor, Reinhold Niebuhr:

> I have had time to think and pray about my situation and that of my nation. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through the difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. . . . Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make the choice in security.

And so he boarded one of the last ships to sail from the United States to Germany. He joined the Confessing Church, a new denomination that spoke out against Nazism, organized a seminary to train pastors for a new and risky prophetic ministry, and he joined the resistance and a plot to assassinate Hitler. When the conspiracy was discovered, he was arrested, spent two years in prison, and was executed on April 9, 1945.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

That may be the most radical, most important thing he ever said. It just may be the most important thing anybody ever said.

It happens in the middle of the story. Jesus and his disciples had been in Galilee, visiting and teaching in the synagogues. He healed the sick, received and welcomed those who were on the margins of society, touched the untouchable, broke bread with the unclean, welcomed the children. His reputation preceded him. Crowds were now waiting for him, following him.

And then one day, after three years, his attitude changes. He turns his attention away from Galilee, south to Jerusalem, from the pleasant serenity of fishing villages and fields of wild lilies to the noise and confusion of the capital city. It’s the day he startles the disciples by asking, “Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?” And when Peter says it for them—a staggering claim—“You are the Christ, the Messiah,” Jesus chooses the occasion to introduce a totally new idea, chooses the occasion to teach them that this adventure is about to take a dangerous turn, chooses the moment to tell them that in all probability this is going to end with his suffering and death.

Peter again: “God forbid, Jesus. You’re not going to get arrested. You’re not going to suffer. If you’re half of what I just called you—the Messiah, God’s anointed, God’s man—you’re not going to suffer and die. That’s nonsense.”

“Get behind me, Peter,” Jesus says. “You missed the whole point.”

And that’s the moment he says, “If you would follow me, take up your cross. If you save your life, you lose it. If you lose it for my sake, you save it.”

He had never mentioned a cross before. They knew what a cross was—the Romans had introduced it—the appallingly cruel and brutal and public means of executing traitors and troublemakers, a very effective means of keeping order and peace. “Take up a cross?” Surely he was kidding. Someone said that you couldn’t find a more difficult marketing strategy than that. “Take up a cross and lose your life” is hardly a way to foster church growth.

In an essay in *Harper’s* last August, “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong,” Bill McKibben argues that American Christianity has subtly exchanged biblical religion for a competing creed—or creeds. One of them is the wildly popular apocalyptic religion of the Left Behind

series of best sellers, which teaches that Christianity is essentially about the end of the world, which is coming soon so you better get on board before it's too late. Even more important, McKibben argues, is a cultural religion, a faith that reflects not the Jesus of the New Testament, with his call to deep sharing and self-sacrifice, but American consumer culture, with its relentless focus on you and me, on the self and its individual needs.

This new religion features sprawling new churches designed like shopping malls to meet every individual need, with "drive-through lattte stands, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and lots of "how to" sermons: 'How to raise your children, have a happy marriage, get ahead in your career, invest your money, reduce your debt.'"

None of that is bad. In fact it is important to take care of yourself and to meet your needs. Some "how to" sermons are helpful.

It's just that it's not what Jesus said. In fact, it's not about Jesus at all, McKibben argues. It takes what Jesus said, with his relentless and radical and demanding focus on others, and turns it completely around so that the focus is on me, my needs, my feelings, my relationships, my salvation.

Do you remember the old Sammy Davis Jr. song "I've Gotta Be Me"?

> Whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong,
> Whether I find a place in this world or . . . never belong,
> I've gotta be me. . . .
> As long as there's a chance that I can
> . . . have it all
> I'll go it alone. That's how it must be. . . .
> I've gotta be me.

"If you would follow me," Jesus said, "deny yourself and take up a cross."

I love something Mark Twain said once. Twain was not conventionally religious, but he did understand the New Testament when he said, "'Just be yourself' is the worst possible advice you can give people."

There is impressive evidence from the psychologists that Jesus was right when he said if you want to find your life you have to lose it. There has always been a suspicion that too much self-reflection is not a good thing, that it can lead to what is known in the trade as "paralysis by analysis."

Professor Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* at New Year's about introspection and self-examination. He cited the poet Theodore Roethke:

> Self contemplation is a curse
> That makes an old confusion worse.

And he reported on a recent study in which

> mildly depressed college students were asked to spend eight minutes thinking about themselves or to spend the same amount of time thinking about mundane topics like 'clouds forming in the sky.' . . . People in the first group, thinking about themselves, focused on negative things in their lives and sunk into a worse mood. People in the other group actually felt better afterward, possibly because the negative self-focus was turned off by the distraction task. (*New York Times*, 29 December 2005)

There is mounting evidence that the best way to feel better about yourself is to forget about yourself and start worrying about something or somebody else. In a new book on the history of happiness, Florida State professor Darrin McMahon reports that simply doing acts of kindness for others produces happiness. He cites John Stuart Mill, who centuries ago observed "those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind" (*New York Times*, 25 December 2005).

Religion ought to do that. Good religion ought to call you out of yourself for a while. That's what public worship in our tradition is about: an invitation to redirect your focus, your attention, from yourself, your needs, your feelings, to something much greater. Theologian Doug Ottati, who led our Lenten retreat last weekend, said that's what a great opening hymn of praise is for —to lead us to do something we haven't done much of all week: forget about our selves, our needs and desires, and lift up our hearts and minds and spirits to the holy mystery of God.

Furthermore, a faithful church is always about something other than itself. An authentic church of Jesus Christ is focused on his agenda, not its own. Its issues are not institutional maintenance, institutional strength and numerical growth, but his issues: justice and peace, standing with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, nurturing the children, welcoming the excluded, living its life for the sake of others.

This gospel of Jesus Christ, this Christianity, is not finally about finding a way to make ourselves feel good, or at least better. This is about truth to base your life on, truth about God, about human life, truth about your life and mine.

This is about a God who loves so much that the life of a beloved son is given.

This is about the amazing and mysterious idea that God holds nothing back in order to show us how powerfully and profoundly and unconditionally we are loved.

And this is about your deepest need and mine: to know that love and to live that love and to become our truest and best selves by finding a way, for the love of God, to give our lives away.

Bonhoeffer did it and we can't forget about it. Tom Fox, a Christian peacemaker, of all things went to Iraq and was a fool for Christ, went to the most dangerous place on the face of the earth, in the name of the Prince of Peace, and lost his life. But not everyone can be a saint or a martyr. The call and challenge to deny yourself, to take up a cross, to lose your life, comes far more modestly to most of us, I think.

- The new mother whose very need and desire comes in a distant second behind her infant's needs and desires
- The parent patiently nurturing a needy child.
- A son or daughter tending to an aging parent.
- A good neighbor spending time with a lonely friend.
- A scientist working late into the night.
- An attorney losing valuable billing hours to attend to the needs of a poor client.
- A spouse caring for a sick husband or wife.

Dana Reeve did it, giving up her own entertainment career to care for her husband, Christopher, during his ten years of almost complete paralysis and, when he died, tirelessly advocating for stem cell research to treat spinal cord injuries, and who died last week at the age of 44.

I don't know anything about her religious preferences or commitments, but I have no trouble imagining Jesus saying, "Welcome. You understood. You got it. That's exactly what I meant."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer died when he was 39 and so never had the opportunity to pursue and enjoy his vocation. But he wrote what has become a very important book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was important personally to me as I struggled with big issues. I had never before heard the call of Jesus Christ so clearly and the challenge of being a Christian so compellingly.

In the book, Bonhoeffer talks about “cheap grace”: religion without the cross, Christian faith with no cost, no demands, no sacrifice, and, he concluded, no life.

When Christ calls a man, he wrote in that book, “he bids him come and die.”

Bonhoeffer’s last weeks were spent with prisoners drawn from all over Europe. Among them was Payne Best, an English officer. Later he wrote,

> Bonhoeffer . . . was all humility and sweetness, he always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. . . . He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and close to him. The following day, Sunday, 8th April, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and his thoughts and resolutions. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said: “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.” Those words “come with us”—for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only — the scaffold.
>
> We bade him good-bye—he drew me aside—‘This is the end,’ he said. ‘For me the beginning of life.’

You and I have only one life to live, only one life in which to respond to the most important words ever spoken, the invitation:

> If any want to become followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will find it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will find it.

Amen.